

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**FOSTERING EQUITY IN PATIENT
ACCESS TO TRANSPLANTATION:**

Differences in Waiting Times for Kidneys



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Inspector General**

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OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past decade, the Office of Inspector General has maintained an active interest in this nation's organ allocation system. Our work has been guided by three underlying tenets that the Congress spelled out in the National Organ Transplant Act:

- An equitable system, with each person on a transplant waiting list having an equal opportunity to receive a transplant subject to established medical criteria;
- A national system adhering to uniform policies and standards; and
- A cooperative system based on the best interests of patients waiting for transplantation.

In 1991, we found that the access of patients to donated kidneys fell short of expectations in some important respects. For example, we found wide variation in waiting times among racial groups, transplant centers and geographic regions. We updated that report in 1998; we found that both racial and geographic disparities in waiting times still exist and, in some cases, seem to be growing. Today, more than 41,000 people are waiting for a kidney transplant, triple the number who were waiting to be transplanted in 1988.

This report is one in a series designed to shed light on the reasons for and implications of inequitable access to organ transplantation. This inquiry analyzes data on median waiting times for kidney transplants for two 3-year periods: January 1993 through December 1995 for median waiting times, and January 1994 through December 1996 for other data. These data are the most recent available from the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN).

Variation in waiting times for a kidney transplant. Our analysis shows considerable variation in median waiting time for kidney transplantation among the OPTN regions. For patients with Type O blood, the most common blood type, median waiting time ranged from 420 days to 1,538 days.

Likelihood of receiving a kidney transplant. Our review shows that patients in regions with a longer waiting time are less likely to receive a transplant. The percentage of patients with Type O blood who received a transplant ranged from 23 percent in the region with the longest median waiting time to 43 percent in the region with the shortest median waiting time.

Likelihood of death while awaiting a kidney transplant. Our review finds little variation in regional death rates, and a limited relationship with length of time on the waiting list. The use of dialysis may provide an explanation for this consistency across regions.

Our work on organ allocation and donation is continuing.